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# **Withdrawing from Politics? Gender, agency and women ex-fighters in Nepal**

Hanna Ketola

King's College London, United Kingdom

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## **Abstract**

Conceptualisations of post-conflict agency have been widely debated in feminist security studies and critical IR. This article distinguishes between three feminist approaches to post-conflict agency – narrative of return, representations of agency and local agency. It argues that all these approaches in distinct ways emphasise a modality of agency *as* resistance. To offer a more encompassing account of post-conflict agency the article engages Saba Mahmood's (2012) critique of the modality of agency in feminist theory and her decoupling of agency from resistance. The article explores experiences of women who fought in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Nepal. It focuses on 'withdrawing from politics', a dynamic whereby women ex-fighters move away from party activities and the public sphere and rearticulates this withdrawing as a location of political agency. The article argues that being an 'ex-PLA' emerges as a form of subjectivity that is crafted through experiencing war and encountering peacebuilding, enabling a production of heterogeneous modalities of agency in the post-conflict context. By examining these modalities, the article challenges us to rethink post-conflict agency beyond the capacity to subvert regulatory gender norms and/or discourses of liberal peace.

Keywords: Agency, conflict, gender, peacebuilding, ex-combatants.

## **Corresponding author:**

Hanna Ketola, 6th Floor, Kings College London, Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, UK

Email: [hanna.ketola@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:hanna.ketola@kcl.ac.uk)

## Introduction

On the first day of conducting interviews, I arrived at a mass gathering organized by the Baidhya faction of the Maoist party in Nepal's southern plains. The gathering took place in a town that continued to be a Maoist stronghold in 2013. In the morning heat a small stage was being built for speeches. Before the programme started, a woman greeted me with the Maoist salute, *Lal Salaam*, and introduced herself as Asmita. She explained that she lived nearby and would be happy to talk to me. Four women who had also been fighters in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) joined us at Asmita's home. While the party programme was in progress a short walk away, the women sat for hours talking about the grievances they had towards their leaders and commanders. My questions about involvement in politics, and about how the women were engaged in party activities or forms of collective mobilization involving other ex-combatants, were met with short answers and a seeming frustration: 'I am tired of all that', 'I have done enough for politics', 'I have no interest in politics'. At first I was concerned – was I talking to the right women? Yet, I also started to wonder what was at stake in these expressions – what does it mean to be 'tired of politics'? What is at stake when women ex-fighters appear to be withdrawing from politics – moving away from party activities and the public sphere?

Based on six months of fieldwork conducted in 2013, during which I interviewed 20 women ex-PLA combatants,<sup>1</sup> this article explores withdrawing from politics as a possible location of political agency. The question of how to conceptualize agency in post-conflict contexts has been widely debated within feminist security studies and critical international relations (IR). The feminist debates extend from a well-established scholarship that examines forms of women's agency emergent from war (Manchanda, 2004; Alison, 2004; Parashar, 2009) and are increasingly engaged with the problem of women's agency in relation to discourses of security and peacebuilding (MacKenzie, 2009; McLeod, 2013; Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 2015). Parallel to these feminist engagements, the question of agency has received increasing attention in the critical IR literature on peacebuilding following the 'local turn' (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013). At the crux of these debates is the question of how to conceptualize the ways in which local actors adopt, modify or resist the actual practices that peacebuilding translates to on the ground (Richmond, 2010; MacGinty, 2010). Yet, the scholarship that examines post-conflict agency through invoking the notion of the 'local' tends to rely on a conceptualization whereby agency is conceived as a capacity to variously modify or subvert 'liberal' forms of peace. Relatedly, feminist scholarship on post-conflict agency has tended to approach the agency of female ex-fighters through a narrative of 'return' – how the capacity to transgress gender norms is constrained in post-conflict contexts and how women return to the private

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<sup>1</sup> I visited four rural and semi-rural districts located in Nepal's southern plains. I met with some of the women whom I interviewed twice.

sphere. As a result, we risk tying women's political agency to a capacity to subvert regulatory gender norms from the outset, and thus miss the important (political) work that they are doing through, for example, 'withdrawing from politics' in the aftermath of armed conflict. Drawing on the work of Saba Mahmood (2012), I instead suggest that by disentangling it from resistance work, we are able to fruitfully rethink agency in post-conflict contexts.

Saba Mahmood calls for a rethinking in the modality of agency in feminist theory: to untie agency from what she identifies as a binary model of enacting and subverting norms, and to decouple agency from resistance (Mahmood, 2012: 20). What I draw from Mahmood is the insight that modalities of agency require specific embodied capacities, and that it is also through 'inhabiting' and 'consummating' norms that such capacities may be cultivated (Mahmood, 2012: 23). This move allows me to foreground the capacities that are crafted through experiencing war (Sylvester, 2012) and encountering peacebuilding, and to examine how these capacities enable specific modalities of agency in the post-conflict context. I conceptualize the processes through which the subjectivity of ex-PLA is crafted into being, occupied and pursued as sites where agential capacities may be expressed (Madhok, 2013).

The Maoist campaign in Nepal lasted for a decade (1996–2006) and was aimed at overthrowing the monarchy and unresponsive political system, replacing it with a new democratic platform and secular republic. The war left 17,000 dead and over 1,300 people disappeared. When the peace agreement was signed between the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and the government of Nepal, the CPN-M was in control of approximately 70% of Nepal's countryside. The movement drew most of its cadres from the rural youth and historically marginalized ethnic and caste groups, and 30–40% of PLA fighters were women. The extent of the change that followed the war was exemplified in the Constituent Assembly (CA) elected in 2008 – the CA was the most representative elected body in Nepal's history and in its first sitting abolished the more-than-200-year-old monarchy. It is against this context and the arrival of the internationally sponsored peacebuilding mission in 2006 that I examine the agency of women who had contributed to the People's War as 'lower-level cadres' – as foot soldiers and low-level commanders.

As we shall see, by foregrounding the capacities that are crafted through experiencing the People's War and encountering peacebuilding, and by examining how these capacities enable specific modalities of agency in the post-conflict context, we are able to glimpse how these modalities challenge us to rethink post-conflict agency beyond the capacity to subvert regulatory gender norms and/or discourses of liberal peace.

This core argument is supported by three analytical moves. First, drawing on Mahmood, I locate agency in the processes through which the ex-PLA subjectivity is crafted into being and in the negotiations the ex-fighters pursue in relation to the Maoist party. I thus shift the focus away from the subversive effects of specific actions to the embodied capacities that modalities of agency require. Next, I conceptualize two specific embodied capacities cultivated through the conduct of the People's War: 'capacity to mobilize' and 'capacity to sacrifice', and examine how these mould into something new; how they are practised differently in the post-conflict context. I thus attend to the distinct temporality of the post-conflict context, foregrounding the shifting locations of politics and the increasing prominence of peacebuilding discourses. Finally, I conceptualize research encounters as productive of distinct forms of agency (Stern et al. 2015; Hedström, 2018). I focus on three such encounters, which I characterize as 'refusing to contribute', 'being tired of politics', and 'emergence of the ex-PLA'. As such, I write in the embodied performances that emerged through conducting the research, drawing on feminist and postcolonial scholarship that engages with the problematics involved in any project that seeks to 'recognize' agency in the Other (Spivak, 1988; Hemmings and Kabesh, 2013).

The three interview encounters discussed are not intended to be fully representative, but allow me to unpack the problematic of withdrawing from politics that emerged from my broader analysis. The encounters 'refusing to contribute' and 'being tired of politics' challenge the narrative of return from two angles. The first shifts the focus away from subversive effects of specific actions to the embodied capacities to mobilize and shows how these mould into something new in the post-conflict context. The second examines the emergence of specific locations of politics as a crucial element of this change. It does so to show how withdrawing from party activities and the public sphere is not reducible to the reinstating of regulatory gender norms. The final encounter, 'emergence of the ex-PLA' examines the 'capacity to sacrifice', thereby relating the modalities of agency examined explicitly to discourses of peacebuilding.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, *Gender, agency and the post-conflict moment*, I situate my argument in relation to three feminist approaches to agency in post-conflict contexts in order to set the stage for my reading of how 'withdrawing from politics' enacts specific modalities of agency. Next, in the section *Decoupling agency from resistance*, I construct my analytical framework through engaging with Saba Mahmood's critique. I then offer a brief contextual background (*From People's War to gender-sensitive peacebuilding*) before turning to the main discussion entitled *Narrating withdrawing from politics*. In this section, I discuss the three interview encounters ('refusing to contribute', 'being tired of politics', and 'emergence of the ex-PLA'), paying attention to how the modalities of agency ('capacity to mobilize' and 'capacity to sacrifice') are enacted differently through these encounters. I then offer some concluding thoughts on how withdrawing from

politics and the modalities of agency it enacts challenge the set of binaries – coercion/resistance and enacting/subverting norms – that underpin theories of post-conflict agency in critical IR and feminist security studies.

## **Gender, agency and the post-conflict moment**

Feminist security studies and critical IR scholars have developed conceptualizations of agency to challenge practices of knowledge and power in post-conflict contexts. As such, agency tends to be associated with subversion and understood in relation to (neo)liberal practices of security and peacebuilding. The three feminist approaches to post-conflict agency examined here – the ‘narrative of return’, ‘representations of agency’ and ‘local agency’ all locate agency in distinct ways. However, all these approaches conceptualize agency primarily as a capacity to subvert – whether regulatory gender norms or hegemonic forms of peacebuilding. Subsequently, it is the modality of agency *as* resistance that is emphasized in feminist engagements with the post-conflict moment.

A prominent strand of feminist literature conceptualizes the ‘post-war moment’ (Cockburn and Zarkov, 2002) as one of fragile opportunity, invested with hopes of affirming forms of women’s agency emergent from war. This interpretation draws on feminist scholarship that challenges representations of women as uniformly victimized by war. It takes as its premise that the myriad, active roles women engage in during war may instantiate reconfigurations of gender norms, and therefore create possibilities for transforming gendered relations of power (Moser and Clark, 2001; Manchanda, 2004). If read through Butler’s (1993) notion of ‘performativity’, this literature points to the possibility that conditions of war effect rearticulations of gender norms, enabling ways to do gender differently (Yadav, 2016). The narrative of return is constructed when these emergent forms of agency are examined in relation to a ‘backlash’ – a dynamic that involves a violent reinstating of regulatory gender norms, including increased levels of gendered violence and restrictions on women’s rights (Meintjes et al. 2001; Handrahan, 2004; Pankhurst, 2007). I do not intend to suggest that there was no backlash in Nepal, nor to question how feminist scholarship debunks distinctions between wartime and post-war context, revealing a continuum of gendered violence and insecurity. Yet the narrative of return also limits how the agency of female ex-fighters is conceptualized.

The Maoist movement in Nepal propagated women’s liberation as part of the class struggle and most of the academic literature emphasizes the CPN-M’s agenda of women’s liberation as the main motivating factor for women to join. The question of ‘women’s agency’ in the PLA is discussed through a problematic of ‘rhetoric versus reality’ to examine whether the involvement of women in the fighting forces amounted to challenging gender norms within the movement and wider society (Manchanda, 2004; Gautam et al. 2003; Shrestha-Schipper, 2009). Beyond the context of Nepal, the

narrative of return is invoked in feminist scholarship on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). A well-established argument holds that DDR practices tend to facilitate a reinstatement of societal gender norms – whether by ignoring women’s contributions (McKay, 2004: 23) or by positioning women as specific kinds of ‘target groups’ with needs and desires that reproduce the regulatory gender norms transgressed during conflict (Pankhurst, 2007: 3; KC and Van der Haar, 2019). In this way, the problematic of agency becomes interpreted as a matter of degree – to what extent do DDR practices facilitate the backlash/affirm agency and to what extent can women negotiate the new forms of coercion that the aftermath instantiates?

Yet, how did the women who contributed to the Maoist movement conceive of the struggle? And subsequently, what is at stake in the withdrawing from politics in the post-conflict context? To clarify, my argument is not about withdrawal as a ‘refusal’ to fight.<sup>2</sup> Being someone who *had* fought and contributed was central to how the women I met expressed their subjectivities as ‘ex-PLA’. I am indebted to feminist scholarship on militant movements that disentangles women’s agency from an already assumed feminist struggle for gender equality and examines how women express various forms of agency – including through engagement with ethno-nationalist discourses or class struggle (Alison, 2004; McEvoy, 2009; Parashar, 2009; Friedman, 2018).

Such a critical unpacking of women’s agency is central to post-structuralist feminist critiques of liberal peace, framed here as ‘representations of agency’. These critiques approach post-conflict agency via analysis of peacebuilding discourses, examining how different modes of agency become ‘assigned’, ‘constrained’ or ‘circumscribed’ and how this is linked with the underlying neoliberal assumptions of peacebuilding (Väyrynen, 2004; Shepherd, 2008; MacKenzie, 2009). This strand has started to emphasize the importance of postcolonial feminisms (Hudson, 2012; Pratt, 2013). While this is an important move, a gap remains whereby the invocation of postcolonial theory is not connected with an exploration of agency as it emerges through situated practices. An unintended consequence is a neatness whereby liberal peacebuilding (through discursive production of gender) is argued to harness or circumscribe modes of agency conceived variously as ‘subaltern’ and/or located in the ‘conflict zone’, these locations emerging as rather uniform and primarily conceived in relation to the international realm/the ‘Women, Peace and Security’ (WPS) agenda. This neatness is problematic as it can freeze the ‘women activists in conflict zones’ (Pratt, 2013: 778) or ‘subaltern women’ (Hudson, 2012: 451) to a resistant presence in relation to liberal forms of peacebuilding, where this resistance as a mode of agency is constantly under the threat of being ‘circumscribed’ or ‘harnessed’ (Pratt, 2013: 780; Hudson, 2012: 447, 450, 451). In contrast, forms of agency that seem to fit the WPS agenda appear merely ‘strategic’ (Pratt, 2013: 780). Thus, while the content of women’s

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<sup>2</sup> For feminist scholarship that discusses agency in relation pacifism see e.g. Frazer and Hutchings (2014).

agency is not fixed (as its discursive construction is under scrutiny), the tendency to theorize agency on the model of enacting/subverting the hegemonic power of liberal peace remains not fully problematized.

A recent strand has (re)shifted the focus to situated practices and examines forms of ‘local agency’ expressed in relation to peacebuilding processes (Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 2015; O’Reilly, 2018). It has emerged partly as a response to the ‘local turn’ in the wider peacebuilding literature (Richmond and Mac Ginty, 2013) and offers a crucial critique of the ‘local’ as a space endowed with agency, foregrounding the ways in which gendered relations of power condition the post-conflict context. Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic construct a nuanced framework to identify gendered agency in the context of transitional justice, differentiating between ‘transformative, critical and creative’ modes (2015: 170). However, these modes are understood to be performed by women to ‘challenge or negotiate patterns of gendered relations of domination’ (Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 2015: 166). Consequently, they foreground specific kinds of ‘female agents’ (Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 2015: 168) whose subjectivities are discussed in relation to motivations to oppose/negotiate gendered relations of subordination and practices of transitional justice that facilitate such forms of domination. O’Reilly challenges such an emphasis and examines the ‘complex, changing, and often conflicting actions and decisions of women engaged in everyday encounters with justice and peacebuilding’, drawing on feminist theories of relational autonomy (2018: 73).

### **Decoupling agency from resistance: Engaging with Saba Mahmood’s critique**

As noted above, I suggest that Mahmood’s conceptualization of agency as a ‘modality of action’ (2012: 157) presents a crucial avenue for rethinking women’s agency in post-conflict. Through ethnographic research into the grassroots piety movement in Cairo, Mahmood calls for a rethinking of the modality of agency in feminist theory: to untie agency from what she identifies as a binary model of enacting and subverting norms, and to decouple agency from resistance (Mahmood, 2012: 20). At the core of Mahmood’s argument is an insistence that modalities of agency need to be understood from within the ‘grammar of concepts’ within which they reside and a proposal that such an analysis must necessarily untie theorization of agency from progressive politics (Mahmood, 2012: 14, 34). Mahmood’s critique has been influential in anthropology, the study of religions and political theory. In feminist IR scholarship, her work has prompted rethinking about the relation between agency and coercion (e.g. Hutchings 2013; Madhok, 2013). Yet, in the vast literature on women’s agency in war



and post-conflict contexts, Mahmood's critique is curiously absent, even when these accounts invoke theories of relational autonomy and post-structuralist understandings of performativity.

In my reading, Mahmood's critique encompasses feminist accounts of relational autonomy, including procedural accounts that endorse content neutrality (Friedman, 2003; Meyers, 1989). What Mahmood critiques is a conceptualization of agency where relative freedom from coercion and women's capacity to formulate and enact self-determined goals are positioned as the ground for measuring and recognizing agency (Mahmood, 2012: 10). While the procedural accounts leave the content of an autonomous choice open, as Hutchings demonstrates, they continue to posit autonomy as a value that ought to be affirmed (Hutchings, 2013: 18–20). Further, the notion of 'autonomy competency' (Meyers, 1989), understood as a capacity for critical reflection that can be developed and deployed to different degrees depending on the context, is linked to the potential of the individual to stay 'resilient' in the face of effective coercion (Hutchings, 2013: 17). Thus, agential moments are agential precisely to the extent that the acting subject remains relatively free from effective coercion. I find this framing dissatisfactory as it reduces the question of what is at stake in withdrawing from politics into one about a 'degree' of agency demonstrated. Too much is already 'known' about agency from the outset.

For example, Mahmood's analysis of the mosque movement shows how one of the effects of the participants' pursuit of piety is the destabilization of certain norms of male kin authority. However, she cautions against locating agency primarily in this capacity to resist. She argues that:

[T]he fact that discourses of piety and male superiority are ineluctably intertwined does not mean that we can assume that the women who inhabit this conjoined matrix are motivated by the desire to subvert or resist terms that secure male domination (Mahmood, 2012: 175).

To demonstrate, Mahmood shows how the abilities to subvert the norms of what it meant to be a dutiful wife were paradoxically predicated upon learning to perfect a tradition that accorded the mosque participants a subordinate status to their husband (Mahmood, 2012: 179). It is such heterogeneous modes of embodying the norm – the 'variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated' (Mahmood, 2012: 22) that Mahmood's more expansive treatment of agency as a modality of action captures.

Mahmood directs her critique also at post-structuralist feminist theory – specifically accounts that draw on Butler's formulation of performativity (Butler, 1993). She argues that Butler's work tends to foreground modalities of agency that have counter-hegemonic potential and relies on an antagonistic model of consolidating/re-signifying norms (Mahmood, 2012: 21–22). Mahmood's critique highlights two things: first, how the interest in the embodiment and enactment of norms is primarily linked to the

possibility of enacting otherwise. And second, how this possibility of subverting the norm then becomes the familiar, recognizable ground for agency. To be clear, in my framing agency *might* take on the modality of subversion and recoding of the norm. Yet, following Mahmood, the capacities to subvert the norm may be mediated by other capacities that do not necessarily correspond to liberatory forms of politics.

For my argument, the analytical value in disentangling agency from resistance is twofold. First, it broadens the range of modalities of agency that come into focus. Thus, resistance – manifesting for instance as a capacity to re-inscribe discourses of peacebuilding – emerges as a possible, but not the only, modality of agency. Second, decoupling agency from resistance shifts the primary focus away from the subversive effects of ways of being and acting to the kind of capacities – embodied, rational or technical – that specific modalities of agency require (Mahmood, 2012: x, 139). This key move allows me to analyse the relation between cultivation of embodied capacities and the modalities of agency these enable. Mahmood arrives at this insight by examining how the mosque participants thematize the body as a site of self-cultivation:

[W]hat is also significant in this programme of self-cultivation is that bodily acts – like wearing the veil ... – do not serve as manipulable masks in a game of public presentation, detachable from an essential interiorized self. Rather they are the *critical markers* of piety as well as the *ineluctable means* by which one trains oneself to be pious (Mahmood, 2012: 158, emphasis original).

In this way, Mahmood conceptualizes the corporeal as a site where the pious subject is crafted into being. The bodily form is not merely an expression of social structure but endows the self with specific capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world (Mahmood, 2012: 139). In my understanding, embodied capacities are crafted through embodied practice – through corporeally encountering and engaging with discourses and concepts that have their own histories. My primary focus is not the feeling body (cf. Hedström, 2018), even if the emotional dimensions of agency enter my reflections. I advance an engagement with the specific discourses and concepts that characterize the subjectivity of being ‘ex-PLA’. The body emerges as a site in which discourses of People’s War continue to be experienced and lived through even when the armed struggle is no longer ongoing. To glimpse the modalities of agency that are enabled by the ex-PLA subjectivity, I foreground the specific embodied capacities that had been cultivated to enable the People’s War in Nepal. This includes capacities linked to cultivating bodies capable of ‘injuring other bodies’ (Sylvester, 2012: 493) as well as capacities to endure violence and mobilize others.

The subjectivities of the women who fought in the PLA differ from those of the women in Mahmood’s ethnography. First, enduring and inflicting violence was a central dimension of how a PLA fighter’s subjectivity was crafted during the war. Second, the Maoist discourse of class struggle

upholds the ideal of a female liberatory subject that Mahmood's ethnography destabilizes. Yet, it is possible to examine how the cultivation of communist virtues is crucial to bringing about the revolutionary subject, a dynamic that Hirslund conceptualizes through the notion of 'communist piety' (Hirslund, 2012: 187). My focus is not so much on how the women ex-fighters cultivated embodied capacities to approximate an ideal of a revolutionary subject, but on how this subjectivity was 'inhabited' (Mahmood, 2012: 22) differently and made into something new in the post-conflict context.

Exploring modes of agency that are not necessarily sutured to resistance does not overcome the ethical and political problematics that accompany attempts to recognize agency in the Other (Spivak, 1988). Hemmings and Kabesh capture a temporality that underpins attempts to 'recognize' agency: 'a self is proposed that recognizes an other that is to become a recognising self in turn, but only at a later point' (2013: 32). This temporality enables two assumptions. First, that the Other has a stake in being brought to subjectivity in this specific mode. And second, that the privileged subject who does the recognizing 'knows' agency when they see it (Hemmings and Kabesh, 2013: 32). Another temporality emerges when the Western feminist subject – the subject who recognizes – reflects upon the limits of their own understanding; first I assumed agency is this, then through the transformative research encounter I understand that it is this instead. Thus, the temporality of recognition frames me as highly reflexive and reflexivity as a means to 'truth' about how the women I met experience agency. What becomes obscured is how my 'desire to locate freedom and create political space' (Stern et al. 2015: 7) governs the research encounters, delineating lines of questioning, prompting certain narratives and not others (Hedström, 2018: 2).

To work with this, I foreground how the subjects whose agency I sought to recognize already had me 'in their sights' (Hemmings, 2012: 153). For example, regardless of what I explained when arranging meetings, the women I met assumed me to be associated with non-government organizations (NGOs). My position was already a part of the epistemological terrain of peacebuilding and the kinds of gendering moves that peacebuilding practices effect. By foregrounding the embodied performances that emerged during our encounters I seek to make visible how the expressions of agency I analyse are also a product of the research process. To contextualize these encounters, the next section details how the narrative of return is produced in the context of policy discourses in post-conflict Nepal.

### **From People's War to gender-sensitive peacebuilding**

After the peace agreement in 2006, Nepal witnessed an increasing presence of international peacebuilding institutions. The United Nations Mission in Nepal was charged was mandated to verify Maoist combatants and to discharge any combatants who had been verified as 'minors', under 18, at

the time of the agreement (Hodgson, 2012). The question of what to do with the two standing armies was highly contested, the CPN-M refusing to accept the term 'DDR' and interpreting the process as one of army integration. Due to the contested nature of the process, PLA combatants spent nearly seven years in cantonments set up as part of the peace agreement and overseen by the CPN-M and later the United Communist Party of Nepal (UCPN-M). The government-led army integration process resulted in only 1,421 of the 19,602 'verified' combatants being integrated into the Nepal Army, with the remaining combatants taking voluntary retirement (cash package) (Robins et al. 2016:18).

The increasing international presence was combined with a growing advocacy around the WPS agenda, and in 2011 the government of Nepal introduced a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement Resolution 1325. The NAP included 'former women combatants' as a specific target group. Yet I was struck by how the NGO representatives associated with the policy were not aware of any programmes directed at female ex-combatants. In interviews a curious construct emerged: 'former women combatants' was distinguished as a separate target group *and* subsumed under the category of 'conflict-affected women'. I argue that this contradiction was enabled by – and consolidated – a narrative of return, whereby women who had fought in the PLA were, in the post-conflict context, constituted as affected by an inevitable 'backlash': stigmatisation and strengthening of societal gender norms.

Within this narrative produced by the discourses of gender and peacebuilding, female ex-combatants are positioned as affected by the policies of the Maoist party and by the 'politicization' of the process of army integration and rehabilitation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, women who fought in the Maoist army are manoeuvred away from the subjectivity of the 'ex-PLA combatant', obscuring the ways in which women may have a stake in the army integration process, or in party policies beyond an already fixed agenda of 'gender sensitive' peacebuilding. This positioning is made intelligible through categories such as 'conflict-affected women'<sup>4</sup> and 'nursing mothers' (Tamang, 2017; MacKenzie, 2009). By 2013 the category of 'conflict-affected women' had become performative, producing what it names, and the advocacy agendas of women's NGOs predominantly addressed women ex-combatants as 'conflict affected'.

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<sup>3</sup> An UN-Instraw document invokes the politicization thesis to explain the 'challenges' that the rehabilitation process in Nepal has faced and resulting 'loss of empowerment' for female ex-combatants (UN-Instraw, 2010: 12).

<sup>4</sup> In the NAP, the category of 'former women combatants' is included as a target group *within* the category of 'conflict-affected women' and thus merged together with other target groups, including 'women who suffered from rape' (Government of Nepal, 2011: 22).

## **Narrating withdrawing from politics**

### ***Refusing to contribute***

This section examines refusal to contribute to party activities as a modality of agency that is pursued in relation to the Maoist party and enabled by the capacity to mobilize cultivated during the war. I argue that the subjectivity of being an ex-PLA is characterized by a complex negotiation of one's relationship to the party, one that is not captured through the lens of the narrative of return.

I met Renuka when conducting interviews in Banke. At the time Renuka was running a small hotel with her husband who had also fought in the PLA, and they had two young children. Renuka was originally from Humla, a remote hill district that became a Maoist stronghold during the war. She had become involved in the Maoist movement through working for the women's front in her village, becoming a full-timer at 16. She had been a village council member, taking on considerable responsibilities as a party worker before joining the PLA. Based on our first conversation it appeared that Renuka had no expectations from the party leaders and envisioned few avenues to continue being involved in politics, despite her long contribution to the struggle.

They made us run for nothing. All good happened to Prachanda, the party workers got nothing. I have just a right to vote. That's it. That is the support I can give to the party.  
(Interview 1)

I met with Renuka again and these conversations complicated the picture. Our meeting took place a week after the second Constituent Assembly elections were held. Nepali Congress had gained a clear victory and the UCPN-M had suffered significant losses. This time we met in a small restaurant run by Renuka's friend who also had fought in the PLA, and the conversation was more informal. When the conversation turned to the elections, Renuka started to share more about her relationship to the party:

The party is like our own mother. We grew up from there, and have become what we are right now through it. I will never leave this party and join some other party ... After all, we have fought for the party for ten years, we have become injured and disabled, our children were also born there... We are still hopeful towards the party, the only thing is that we are still looking, watching and observing which politicians will do what... Who will raise the issues that were of concern yesterday? ... We are not going to leave it. ... Yesterday we fought for the country, now it's our time to see what they will do. We have already brought changes according to our capacity. Now we need to see what they will do... (Interview 2)

Through this narrative, which was delivered passionately, as a long, un-interrupted speech, Renuka not only emphasized the contribution she and other PLA fighters had made – 'we have already brought changes according to our capacity' – but also connected this contribution with her ability to evaluate the current leadership. The key is Renuka's statement that she was 'waiting to see' what the

leaders will do. By the time of our second meeting this ‘waiting’ had translated into concrete practices through which Renuka was withdrawing her support, including her refusal to participate in party activities to secure votes in her home district.

Mahmood highlights how ‘specific conceptions of the self ... require different kinds of bodily capacities’ (Mahmood, 2012: 139). She argues that to explore agency in its various modalities we need to attend to these capacities – and specifically, to the work they do in forming the subject. Learning from Mahmood, we can see how the ‘capacity to bring changes’ Renuka had cultivated during war moulds into something new in the post-conflict context, enabling specific ways of being and acting as ‘ex-PLA’ that she pursues in relation to the party.

Renuka shared how she had been invited to participate in election activities:

One of my brothers (*dai*) was a candidate for the party ... He called me and invited me to the village for election activities. I asked him politely to send me money so that I could cover the travel costs from Kohalpur to Humla. I also told him that this is not only a matter of my vote. It concerns votes of other 100–150 people as well. But he did not follow up. ... Now there is a surge of new cadres. They have encircled the leadership from all sides. But no one matches the loyalty and spirit of the original, seasoned cadres. The newcomers would go around for two or three days, chant slogans ... My brother rang me again two days ago. He complained that the party's candidate from the direct representation category lost because we had become passive ...

In contrast to the first interview where Renuka declared with frustration that: ‘I have just a right to vote’, in the second conversation she represented herself as a ‘seasoned cadre’, who could not only support the party by giving her *own* vote but indeed by utilizing her capacities to mobilize others. And it is *this* form of contribution that Renuka had refused to give. Renuka explained further why she had decided not to go:

If I have to go for a month or two, to campaign for my party, who will give me economic support? The party is not going to give it. I have to pay rent for the house I live in, if my hotel does not work for 10 days, then I will have a loss ... They would ask us to use our own money and say they would arrange the budget later. Then they would say that no one paid for the transport, so we have to manage that ourselves. Now we cannot sit like beggars hoping that someone or other will support us. So because of that I think it's better not to go at all. (Interview 2)

Importantly, the party providing/not providing financial support is, in Renuka's story, invested with meaning that goes beyond the practicalities of being able to sustain her family's livelihood. It becomes connected with her potential contribution not being valued, and with her not being treated with the respect she deserves as a seasoned cadre – ‘we cannot sit like beggars’.

I was struck by the way in which Renuka not only narrated her capacity to mobilize others but also performed elements of it, delivering long un-interrupted speeches in a manner perhaps not dissimilar

to how she would have spoken if convincing people to vote. After the interview, the research assistant and I discussed how Renuka had spoken ‘so strongly’. To us this ‘speaking strongly’ manifested in the ways Renuka was holding her body upright, meeting our eyes, and in her effortless command of the Maoist rhetoric. She delivered a speech and made us listen. The ways in which Renuka sought to convince us of her capacities, and how we noticed these, highlights how embodied performances during research encounters both produce and contain knowledge and forms of agency (Hedström, 2018).

If read through the narrative of return, Renuka’s story would appear as one where her wartime contribution goes unrecognized – the party does not value her as a ‘seasoned cadre’. Rather than foregrounding this lack of recognition and reading it as a denial of women’s wartime agency (Pankhurst, 2007; McKay, 2004) I argue that Renuka’s reflections about her relationship to the party tell a more complex story. The embodied capacities Renuka has crafted during the war that she talks about and performs are not simply shaken off when they go unrecognized. Rather, what Renuka does through her withdrawal is to refuse to employ her capacity to mobilize others until the conditions are right, and through this withdrawal, retains the integrity of her commitment to the struggle. Mahmood prompts us to attend to the ‘specificity of embodied capacities’ but also ‘to the kind of work they perform on the self’ (2012: 167). I suggest that Renuka’s act of refusal not only draws on embodied capacities cultivated during war but also performs important ‘work’ in the formation of the ex-PLA subjectivity as one that is characterized by continuing loyalty to the struggle and pursued in relation to the ‘leaders’.

### ***‘I am tired of politics’***

This section explores what is at stake in the women ex-fighters’ move away from the public sphere and the concomitant prioritization of familial responsibilities. I write against reducing this withdrawal to the narrative of return – to how regulatory gender norms are reinstated. I argue that the picture becomes more complex if we examine how the women ex-fighters interpreted the location of ‘politics’ in the post-conflict context.

At the beginning of our fieldwork, I and the research assistant asked questions about a connection between childcare responsibilities and *women’s* decreasing involvement in party activities. Sarika confronted our leading questions with annoyance:

Me: How is it for women to be involved in party activities?

Sarika: If required, we can do anything, work along with anyone. While being in the cantonments, we did everything equal. Even now if required, we can do it.

Research Assistant: There are children with you will that not make things more difficult?

Sarika: Nothing can stop us. When there was war we used to carry two children along with rifle and bag ... We can work in any situation; we have examples of going on fighting when we were pregnant and giving birth to children. Now, children have grown up, we can be better fighters now. (Interview 3)

As Sarika's comments – 'we can be better fighters now' illustrate, the women I met were aware of the narrative of return. No matter how much they had contributed during the war, it was already decided (amongst peacebuilding actors and the leadership of the party) that what 'women' were doing after the armed struggle was a manifestation of a 'return'. Specifically, a manifestation of a shift towards 'passivity' and loss of agency. In other interviews our questions about non-involvement in party activities prompted a similar emphasis on continuing capacities to undertake demanding tasks, often with emphasis on physical strength. For example, several women stressed that women did push-ups as part of the training regime in the cantonments. In this way, Sarika and others invoked the physical strength cultivated during war to counter our questions and the narrative of return that the peacebuilding discourses produce. Linking to the approach 'representations of agency', these performances illustrate how discourses of peacebuilding govern expressions of agency also in and through research encounters, and Sarika's responses can be located as an instant where these discourses are (momentarily) subverted.

These are important insights, yet not the full picture. To delve deeper, I focus on Anar's reflections on what it means to be 'tired of politics'. Anar had been a platoon commander and in our first meeting said she was 'tired of politics'. Later, Anar invited me and the research assistant to her home. When we were sitting outside and eating popped corn Anar had prepared, her husband joined us and brought a framed photo of Anar and himself in PLA uniforms, taken on the day of their marriage ceremony. Seeing the photo Anar laughed and told us how her husband was still very active in politics and was starting a new party with other ex-PLA members. When conducting a follow-up interview, I asked Anar to tell us why she had said she was 'tired of politics', and what this meant when her husband was still so active.

Anar responded by explaining how getting or not getting involved in 'politics' happened according to 'situation'. The first part of her story, where Anar equates 'politics' with armed struggle offers insights into the 'situation' in which she joined the movement:

See it is like this, at that time the situation was different, because there was a lot of oppression from the government ... even when we used to go to school, we did not get to study because the police would come there as well ... one of our brothers became a martyr as well ... And at that time, people were more focused on taking revenge for the life of the martyr. It was kind of giving respect to the martyr. And after all of that happened, then I also went into the movement. It was kind of due to compulsion and the feeling of taking revenge. (Interview 4)



These reflections highlight the context of enduring and witnessing violence in which Anar joined the movement. The decision of joining is rendered meaningful through the Maoist discourse of a people's war and specific concepts such as martyrdom (LeComte-Tilouine, 2013). Maoism in Nepal was formulated in 'sacrificial terms' (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2013: 37) and a central aspect of the movement was veneration of 'martyrdom', martyrs becoming heroes in Maoist books and poetry. The temporality of Anar's story is important. The equation of politics with armed struggle, characterized by 'taking revenge for the life of the martyr', emerges as something specific for 'that time'.

Anar then elaborated on her husband's continuing involvement and her own decision 'not to get involved', invoking the temporality of the 'current situation':

And in the current situation, we think that we did get involved in politics but nothing good came out of it. It has spoiled our lives. ... My husband thinks that we need to be involved in politics. After all we have spent so much time and effort in yesterday's war, and how can we just leave it like that and stay home. Life itself is politics ... But I disagree and always tell him to leave politics. I don't think we have a future in politics ... [P]ersonally I am tired of politics, although my husband is not yet. He has this strong will of getting into politics and has a dream of doing something in the political sector. For me, in comparison to politics I chose business and entrepreneurship and taking care of my family. That is my opinion. (Interview 4)

Anar positions herself as someone who has fought, who 'got involved in politics' and whose life was 'spoiled by it'. And it is in relation to this grievance that she weighs her decision *not* to pursue efforts to 'get into politics'. It could be argued that this decision is perfectly recognizable as a mode of agency within the feminist theorization of 'procedural autonomy' (Friedman, 2003). Anar's story suggests that she is reflecting on her 'preferred preferences', free from effective coercion, and then acts in accordance with these (Friedman, 2003). Indeed, Anar finishes her story by emphasizing the autonomy exercised in her decision. The withdrawal from the public sphere could be positioned as demonstrative of agency, 'because the women chose so'. However, this reading is unsatisfying as it reduces the question of agency into one of a degree (relative freedom from effective coercion) and says little about what is at stake in the withdrawal.

Drawing on Mahmood, we cannot assume that an analysis that 'focuses on the subversive effects [that] ... practices produce adequately captures the meanings of these practices, that is, what these practices "do" within the discursive context of their enactment' (Mahmood, 2012: 175). Hence, to engage with such nuances we need to examine how the women ex-fighters interpret the locations that politics takes on in the post-conflict context. From Anar's narrative, 'politics' in the current context emerges no longer *only* as a struggle but also as a distinct 'sector', as something that her husband is trying to 'get into' and Anar contrasts with 'business, entrepreneurship and taking care of my family'. To me, Anar's reflections highlight how the prioritization of responsibilities towards the family and

the weighing of these against continuing involvement in party activities is a negotiation that cannot be reduced to the reinstating of societal gender norms. The complexity of the picture is revealed if ‘politics’ is conceived as a realm that is shifting – from armed struggle to a ‘sector’ that is hard to reach or a ‘career’ that is hard to attain. This attaining is *conditioned by*, but not reducible to, gendered hierarchies – according to Anar her husband would also struggle to have a ‘future in politics’.

My intention is not to uphold an understanding of politics as confined to public discourse. What I argue is that Anar’s decision to ‘not get involved’ should be located in a context in which the UCPN-M had become well-established in parliamentary politics, with many high-level PLA commanders, including women, pursuing a political career. The women I met, including Renuka and Anar, had not moved *with* this shift, and positioned the women who had as part of the group of ‘leaders’ whose conduct they scrutinized. By paying attention to the discursive context of the People’s War, the decision to withdraw starts to appear more complex; this action involving ‘inhabiting’ (Mahmood, 2012: 23) norms around what it means to ‘take care of your family’ (as a wife, mother or daughter in-law) as well as crafting into being and occupying a subjectivity of someone ‘who had fought’. This subjectivity is inseparable from the capacities Anar had cultivated during war, including the capacity to sacrifice. These nuances go missing if we are *primarily* concerned with agency as a capacity to subvert discourses of peacebuilding or as a capacity to act relatively free from regulatory gender norms.

### ***The emergence of the ‘ex-PLA’***

This section examines further the modalities of agency enabled by the ex-PLA subjectivity by explicitly situating them in relation to practices of peacebuilding. I argue that it is precisely through engaging with the discursive realm of peacebuilding that the women I met crafted into being the collective subject of the ex-PLA, occupying it as the ‘lower level cadres’. Rather than locating agency primarily in instances where discourses of peacebuilding are subverted (for instance through inscribing new meanings to policy categories), drawing on Mahmood, I explore the work that such engagements *do* in forming the subjectivity of the ex-PLA. I focus on how the women I met engaged with discourses produced by the UN-led process of ‘verifying’ combatants, a supposedly bureaucratic exercise to determine who qualifies as a combatant. Drawing on the critical scholarship on DDR, I understand verification processes as contentions and the delineation of who constitutes a combatant as a political exercise (Hodgson, 2012; MacKenzie, 2009).

I met Punam at a similar gathering to the one I describe in the beginning of this article. Having been a company commander, Punam had the highest rank of the women present. One of the women jokingly

said that Punam *didī*<sup>5</sup> should be interviewed first because she was the ‘commander’. While Punam laughed at this comment, she did speak first and, unlike during the other interviews, everyone gathered around and listened. Punam explained how she had first ‘felt hopeful’ when entering the cantonment, even if this shift had been hard:

We used to go everywhere ... had collected experiences, gone through happiness and sorrows. ... Suddenly, when we had to stay in the cantonment we felt like we were jailed ... We thought that if there are chances of forming a government according to the peoples’ will, if the hardships we had to go through and the martyrs who got injured or died in the war get acknowledged, there is no problem for us to stay. Now while staying there, many things happened. We belong nowhere now.

Elaborating on the ‘many things’ that had happened Punam talked about the UN verification process:

After the verification many of our great friends got disqualified, those who should not have been disqualified were disqualified too, but at the same time the husband who brought his wife ... who does not even know anything about party all were verified. Those who were close to the commanders did it ... We worked many years for people’s war so we know who has suffered, who have sacrificed their family, sacrificed their home, we know who they are and they got disqualified. (Interview 5)

While Punam herself had been ‘verified’ as a combatant, the way in which the process had been conducted undermined not only the contribution of the ‘friends who got disqualified’ but also her own contribution to the People’s War. Punam articulated the distinction between who should/should not have been ‘verified’ based on the person’s sacrifice and contribution. In this way, the capacity to sacrifice becomes employed differently in the post-conflict context. In Punam’s reflections the verification process and the categories it produced – ‘verified’, ‘disqualified’ – become invested with the power of recognizing/not recognizing sacrifice and consequently emerge as a contested exercise. Similarly, Asmita employed these categories to designate who was recognized as having contributed to the ‘fight for the nation’:

[T]hey tagged some of our friends as minors, we didn’t feel good about it at all. They fought for years with all its sufferings, they were able people when the war was on, but in the verification, same people were tagged as minors ... What I felt was, after this process started, PLA had no value at all. (Interview 6)

It would be possible to read agency as demonstrated in the ways that Punam and Asmita re-inscribed discourses of verification to open space for contestation. This is an important insight and resonates with the feminist scholarship on ‘local agency’, which highlights how women who are targets of peacebuilding through situated practices engage with and modify policy discourses. Agency would be located as the capacity to draw on – as well as to challenge – the norms around who qualifies as a combatant.

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<sup>5</sup> Literal meaning: older sister

However, what is perhaps more interesting about Punam's and Asmita's narratives is how it is precisely through engaging with the concepts produced by the UN process that the collective subject of the ex-PLA is crafted into being. It is also worth noting that the grievances around the non-recognition of sacrifice and contribution that go to the core of what being an 'ex-PLA' involved were not primarily articulated in relation to the 'internationals' but in relation to the party. As discussed throughout the article, it was the 'leaders' and 'commanders' that the women passionately critiqued. While Punam had the highest rank of the women present, her narrative also was peppered with critiques of the conduct of 'commanders'. These critiques related to the life in the cantonments as well as the outcome of the verification process. During the cantonment time new hierarchies within the PLA had started to crystallize, and it is in relation to these hierarchies that the women I met situated themselves and occupied the collective subject of ex-PLA as the 'lower level cadre'.

My concern is that these nuances of how the subjectivity of the ex-PLA is crafted into being and occupied go missing if we hold onto a preoccupation with post-conflict agency as a capacity to resist or modify hegemonic discourses of liberal peace, prevalent in critical IR theorization of local agency. To clarify, in my understanding, thinking about agency beyond resistance is not about disentangling these two concepts in an abstract way. Drawing on Mahmood, I argue for a shift in focus: not to locate agency from the outset in the subversive *effects* of specific actions, but to ask questions about the specific embodied capacities that *enable* these actions and the discursive context within which such capacities are cultivated. Building on my discussion of the modalities of agency enabled by the ex-PLA subjectivity, this section has offered glimpses into how discourses of verification and the categories these generated were another ground for crafting into being and occupying the collective subject of the ex-PLA. This aspect is difficult to capture if our primary concern remains whether or not these discourses are subverted.

## Conclusion

The stories I have told about withdrawing from politics could have been told otherwise – my aim is not to present the 'final' reading. Yet, if confronted by 'I am tired of politics', feminist analysis responds by holding on to the narrative of return, and not very much new enters the picture. Rather, we risk perpetuating precisely the kind of gendering that the women I met rejected; *as* women they exercised agency during war through their participation and this form of agency is constrained in the post-conflict context to various extents. Instead I have suggested that the complex negotiations Renuka and Anar pursue in relation to the party can be understood as a way of expressing and pursuing a new form of subjectivity – being an ex-PLA. The modalities of agency this subjectivity enables 'escape the logic of resistance and subversion of norms' (Mahmood 2012: 167). To demonstrate, I have examined how these modalities of agency are intricately linked to embodied

capacities cultivated during war and enabled by engagements with discourses of peacebuilding. I suggest that the encounters explored tell a story about how the women who fought in the PLA were, through their negotiations with the party, enacting new forms of politics not reducible to the ‘political sector’ that Anar rejected.

My argument contributes to feminist security studies and critical IR by offering a more heterogeneous understanding of post-conflict agency, one attuned to multiple modalities. I argue that decoupling agency from resistance, as Mahmood suggests, is a productive analytical move. First, it prompts us to examine agency beyond the question of a degree of relative freedom in the face of coercion. And second, it shifts the focus away from subversive effects of specific actions into the intricate processes through which capacities are cultivated. The three feminist approaches to post-conflict agency I have outlined locate coercion in various ways: in the reinstating of gender norms in post-conflict contexts, in how peacebuilding discourses limit intelligible forms of agency, and in the policy practices these discursive formations translate to. It is tempting to think about agency *primarily* in relation to these forms of coercion – as a capacity to negotiate, modify or resist. There is immense value in such an analysis. Yet, the nuances around what is at stake in being an ‘ex-PLA’ go missing if we examine agency from the outset through the binaries of coercion/resistance and enacting/subverting norms.

My argument also raises a methodological question about recognizing agency. I have approached expressions agency as not ‘out there’ for me to examine but unfolding through the research encounters. The act of recognizing agency in the Other instantiates a feminist judgement about what counts as agency and involves hopes about the work that this recognition will do politically. Read this way, theories of agency remain entangled in feminist politics, and it is only by attending to such entanglements that theories of post-conflict agency can be broadened.

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Interview 2 Renuka, ex-PLA combatant, Banke, 29 November 2013

Interview 3 Sarika, ex-PLA combatant, Nawalparasi, 23 May 2013

Interview 4 Anar, ex-PLA combatant, Nawalparasi, 10 December 2013

Interview 5 Punam, ex-PLA combatant, Banke, 26 May 2013

Interview 6 Asmita, ex-PLA combatant, Nawalparasi, 23 May 2013

## **Author biography**

Hanna Ketola is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the department of War Studies at King's College London. Her research concerns war and peacebuilding with a particular focus on feminist understandings of agency and embodiment, subaltern politics and ethnographic methods. She is currently finalizing a monograph based on her PhD research conducted in Nepal.